Explanations, accounts, and illusions

A critical analysis

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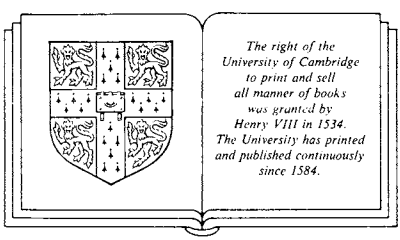

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1 Introduction

Explanations for behaviour

Recent years have seen substantial claims emerging in the field of social cognition. First and foremost, claims are made concerning people's understanding of their mental processes and their actions. Nisbett and Wilson (1977) conclude in a classic paper on this issue that 'one has no more certain knowledge of the workings of one's own mind than would an outsider with intimate knowledge of one's history and of the stimuli present at the time the cognitive process occurred' (p. 257). This claim implies a significant discovery: the finding that people do not know the workings of their own minds. And does this assertion reflect an empirical finding, or is it merely opinion? The authors claim that it is an empirical finding, certified by evidence: 'The evidence indicates it may be quite misleading for social scientists to ask their subjects about the influences on their evaluations, choices or behaviour. The relevant research indicates that such reports, as well as predictions, may have little value except for whatever utility they may have in the study of verbal explanations per se' (p. 247). Scientific investigations, according to this view, show that people's explanations of their actions have little value for understanding their behaviour (Wilson, 1985).

In these and similar assertions, researchers in social cognition claim to have solved major questions about human consciousness and action. The most notable thinkers of Western philosophy and psychology have wrangled and are wrangling still with the issues of consciousness, explanations of behaviour and, in particular, self-explanations (e.g., Davidson, 1963; MacIntyre, 1971; C. Taylor, 1964). Many of the claims in social psychology favour schools of thought which explain mental processes and action in deterministic terms, and place a low value on introspection and the role of intention in action. The field of social cognition, in which these claims are made, is riding on the crest of psychology's cognitive wave (Carroll and Payne, 1976), and is at the forefront of developments in mainstream social psychology.

There have been critical reactions to the sorts of claims cited above. The

assertion that people lack any special access to the causes of their actions is strongly criticized by authors who argue for a phenomenological view of human action as purposive and intentional (e.g., Buss, 1978; deCharms, 1968; Locke and Pennington, 1982; Shotter, 1981a, b, 1984). In countering the claims made in social cognition, this alternative position is frequently argued in axiomatic or conceptual terms. DeCharms and Shea's (1976) and Shotter's (1984) case for intention rests heavily on re-labelling people 'Persons' and behaviour 'actions'. In their theory of self-explanations, deCharms and Shea write that 'The new approach is based on the concept of a Person as an agent in the world', and that 'the distinguishing characteristic of an action is that it is done by a *Person* who has an Intention' (p. 259). Buss (1978) also attempts at one point to save intentions from dissolution at the hands of science by his use of particular definitions. He contests claims that people's self-explanations are valueless on the basis of the distinction between reasons and causes. People never give causes for their own behaviour, he suggests, but only reasons. Research in social cognition only explains people's reference to causes, and therefore does not explain the giving of reasons. Similar arguments are posed by Shotter (1981a, b, 1984) and Locke and Pennington (1982).

Whatever their validity and significance, these arguments tend to carry the issue back to philosophy. In challenging the claim that research shows that introspective access does not assist self-explanation, critics arguing for a more phenomenological perspective have not provided a close examination of the evidence and inferences that underlie the argument. These critics frequently do not tackle the argument on empirical territory, although there are interesting exceptions (e.g., Gergen, 1980, 1982). Empirical counter-arguments, however, are provided by authors who consider the issue in terms of models and research in cognitive psychology, rather than from a specifically phenomenological stance (Bargh, 1984; Ericsson and Simon, 1980; Gavanski and Hoffman, 1987; Morris, 1981). In this book, an attempt is made to discuss the research and theory on these issues in both conceptual and empirical terms. In addition to discussing the more polarized positivist and phenomenological views on the issues, and various positions between these extremes, the argument considers and advocates a critical perspective which takes into account both intentional and deterministic factors in people's action and cognition. The discussion also examines several recent developments in social cognition relating to cognition and self-explanation, particularly the concepts of self-schemata, person memory and action identification. Equal consideration is given to recent developments in alternative paradigms, in particular discourse analysis.

Cognitive distortions and illusions

Research in social cognition connects with broader concerns in the human sciences on a second issue, the source of people's cognitive biases and illusions about their behaviour. The illusory nature of cognitions and self-perceptions is also a central concern of critical theories, which are concerned with explaining the illusions and ideologies which they consider to characterize and inhibit much human thinking (Billig, 1982; Habermas, 1970; Sampson, 1983). Researchers in social cognition claim to explain cognitive and perceptual illusions and to do so in terms of non-motivational factors, such as errors in information-processing (e.g. Nisbett and Ross, 1980). The discussion here reviews research in social cognition dealing with illusions and self-misattributions, and suggests that certain cases of illusions may be interpreted in terms of a critical perspective that takes account of both motivational and contextual factors.

The issue of illusions and cognitive biases leads into abnormal and clinical psychology. It is often claimed that attributions and related cognitions play a significant part in several major disorders and in therapeutic change. Research on locus of control focuses on the effect of people's perceptions of uncontrollable causes for their actions and outcomes, and several authors link attributions to the occurrence of depression and helplessness (e.g., Abramson, Seligman and Teasdale, 1978). Other clinicians have manipulated attributions as a form of therapy for anxiety disorders. Laing (1961/1971) claimed that the internalization of interpersonal attributions is a factor in the etiology of schizophrenia. These applications have frequently been couched in terms of either behavioural (or positivist) models, in the case of locus of control, helplessness and misattribution therapy, or phenomenological models, in the case of Laing's account of schizophrenia. The behavioural accounts emphasize deterministic causes while the phenomenological models argue for an intentional dimension to people's actions and perceptions in this context. The discussion here attempts to achieve a degree of synthesis of key aspects of these two approaches in terms of a perspective that incorporates cognitive, motivational and social factors. It is suggested that this approach has valuable implications for therapy that are largely precluded by the assumptions of the alternative approaches. The discussion links these ideas to therapies that focus on cognitive and linguistic processes relating to psychopathology and therapeutic change.

The book proceeds according to the following plan. Chapter 2 outlines the main features of three dominant paradigms in the explanation of behaviour: these are referred to as the positivist, phenomenological and critical approaches. Each paradigm provides an account of intentions, reasons,

causes and self-perceptions. It is argued in this chapter that positivist explanations fail to capture important aspects of cognition and action relating to intention, but that phenomenological stances commit the opposite fallacy of treating people's behaviour as wholly intentional, and self-awareness as necessarily accurate. The chapter argues for a more sceptical stance to self-knowledge, as espoused by critical explanations. The chapter serves as a reference point for the basic axioms of these three approaches that emerge in several parts of the book.

Following the argument supporting a critical perspective in chapter 2, chapter 3 describes critical accounts of illusory perceptions, particularly the issue of how those perceptions are induced and how they are eliminated. Starting from Fromm's (1970) synthesis of common features of ideological and psychodynamic accounts of illusions, the discussion then reviews changes in critical theories made by the Frankfurt School. The discussion then moves to Habermas's (e.g., 1970) linguistic formulation of cognitive distortions, and his discussion of the interests underlying different forms of scientific inquiry. This section is followed by specific examples of contemporary critical perspectives in social psychology, focusing particularly on ideology (e.g., Broughton, 1986), intergroup relations (Billig, 1976) and theories of justice and equity (Sampson, 1975, 1983).

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 deal with theories and research focusing on self-perception and explanations of actions. The chapters focus both on models in social cognition and on theories drawing on alternative theoretical roots. These theories include models which arrive at similar conclusions to the corresponding viewpoints in general psychological theory (chapter 2). But the conclusions are reached, at least apparently, on the basis of empirical research. This evidence and the inferences that researchers make are examined in some detail. Chapter 4 discusses the way in which action, cognition and self-awareness are dealt with by contemporary models in social cognition. The chapter begins with D. J. Bem's (1972) and Nisbett and Wilson's (1977) argument in favour of a fairly positivist stance, and proceeds to discussions of self-schemata, person memory, and Vallacher and Wegner's (e.g., 1987) theory of action identification. Chapter 5 reviews the way in which the same issues are dealt with in alternative paradigms such as phenomenology and hermeneutics (e.g., Gergen, 1982; Shotter, 1984). Chapter 6 examines arguments favouring models that capture the functional nature of explanations, especially self-presentational factors, and various functions that characterize common discourse (Michael, 1989; Potter and Wetherell, 1987).

Chapters 7 and 8 broaden the discussion to applications in abnormal psychology, and show how the issues and assumptions seen in social cognition apply to the abnormal domain. These chapters clarify the

practical significance to many observations made in earlier chapters. Chapter 7 deals particularly with cognitive biases in relation to attribution, locus of control, attribution therapy and most extensively, learned helplessness. Chapter 8 first examines Laing's and Rogers' phenomenological accounts of psychopathology and therapy. It then considers cognitive models that focus on the beliefs and thinking of the client (e.g., Meichenbaum, 1977) and linguistic therapies that focus on the discourse on the client and therapist (e.g., Labov and Fanshel, 1977).

Chapter 9 turns to theory and research dealing with conflict and contradictions in cognitions, focusing particularly on the concept of discounting. Whereas discounting notions suggest that people discount alternative or contradictory explanations, other concepts, such as dialectical models, suggest that people's cognition may incorporate opposing causal forces that reflect opposing causes in the external world. The discussion deals with a number of theoretical perspectives and analogies that could replace the analogy between people's thinking and scientific inference.

The various themes in the book are drawn together in the conclusion (chapter 10), providing a basis for future research and theory.